

# ART MONTHLY

AUSTRALIA



AU\$12.95  
NZ\$14.95



Lisa Reihana  
8th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art  
New Zealand focus issue

AUCKLAND  
ART GALLERY  
TOI OTAMAKI

## Necessary Distraction

## A Painting Show

28 Nov 2015  
— 28 Mar 2016  
Free Entry



CONTEMPORARY  
BENEFACTORS

Resene  
the paint the professionals use

Stella Corkery Smoke and Butterfly 2015  
courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett

# Slow burn

Robyn Backen's 'If you do not speak, do I speak for you?'



John Murphy, Sydney

Top:  
Robyn Backen, *If you do not speak, do I speak for you?*, 2015,  
installation view, Incinerator Art Space, Sydney, 2015; photo: Ian Hobbs

Opposite:  
Walter Burley Griffin, drawing of the planned incinerator for Willoughby,  
New South Wales, c. 1930–37, from the Eric Milton Nicholls collection,  
National Library of Australia, Canberra: nla.pic-vn3944572

On a wet weekday afternoon in September 1934, the Mayor of Willoughby opened the Council's new incinerator before 60 guests. Although the incinerator replaced an open tip at the portentously named Flat Rock Gully, its approval had been disputed. The contract was awarded to the Reverberatory Incinerator and Engineering Company (RIECO), which collaborated with the architect Walter Burley Griffin and his associate Eric Nicholls in constructing 12 incinerators, six of which have survived as architectural monuments with renewed functions. As RIECO's title denotes, one of its innovations was to reverberate the incinerator's functions: its heat was reflected for other purposes, including the sterilisation of sanitary pans.

Reverberation is also a capable term for the history of the Willoughby Incinerator. The opposition to its construction resurfaced in the mid-1970s in a wish to demolish it; the past disposal of refuse was counterpoised when the building became a restaurant, its ovens appeasing 1980s palates. The incinerator itself was consumed by fire before it was reinvented finally as a Council art space. In September this year it was one of the hosts of the inaugural Willoughby Visual Arts Biennial. Its theme, 'Imagining Place', was an especially fertile one for the building, and the sculptor and installation artist Robyn Backen was invited to react to the site, working with curator Venita Poblocki and mentoring local artist Sarah Fitzgerald.

The Willoughby Incinerator steps down the side of an embankment in a series of skillions; like the digestive system, it was fed at the top floor, and the garbage fell through chutes until incineration was completed and its residue was discharged as ash, re-used partly for road base. Backen's installation took place in the building's lowest floor, where incineration occurred before the residue was released into a quenching chamber. The installation began with quotations from the American physicist Richard Feynman, who described the phenomenon of fire in a way that combined theoretical sophistication with animistic undertones. Atoms of oxygen 'would prefer to be closer' to those of carbon in wood, and with sufficient stimulation the atoms 'bump against each other', they 'jiggle faster and faster' and 'snap together'.<sup>1</sup> The result of this feverish exchange is fire. The quotations from Feynman moved across an introductory screen until the text itself became atomised, breaking apart before reforming into words.

Backen's selection of quotations suggested her interest in fire as a form of motion; the components of her installation were volatile – they jiggled and reverberated with each other and the building. Private thoughts and public forces were also intertwined. For some visitors, her quotations from Feynman

may have 'snapped together' with the analysis of Griffin's incinerators made by his wife and fellow architect Marion Mahony Griffin. Feynman contributed to the Manhattan Project's development of the atomic bomb, and after the Second World War Marion Griffin identified the Pyrmont Incinerator as a unique record of twentieth-century civilisation, one that had been emphasised by the 'smashing of the atom'. In strange exalted terms she specified the metaphysical qualities of the incinerator's ornament, 'the record of what remains when matter is destroyed'.<sup>2</sup>

Poised within the room was a slender tower, constructed by Backen as a type of furnace. We were permitted to enter and borrow its privacy, but the enclosure was permeable, like the womb, to disembodied voices, and the question 'If you do not speak, do I speak for you?' was heard. Voiced by different speakers, it was repeated as an incantation to bring forth a reaction. The internal walls of the chamber were alive to our presence and captured the sound of any movement or word.

The sounds were recorded or 'burnt', as Backen phrased it, so their residue was kept. The experience within this dark retort resembled the initial step made by alchemists, the blackening or *nigredo* stage that began purification by slow fire, associated psychologically with releasing the rotten matter of falseness.

On leaving the tower, we may have observed a silent film playing on a shelf of space above us. Within this context, the repetition of its screening recalled the behaviour of fire: it spluttered, asserted itself and disappeared before flaring again to life. The archival film promoted the secluded estate in

Sydney's Middle Harbour designed as a model suburb by the Griffins. Occupying an elevated position, the film's figures appeared like disporting spirits, empyrean in their removal from the room's machinery and untroubled by the routines of refuse and its disposal. The excerpt recorded a dance performed on an apron of land, surrounded by the wooded foreshores of Middle Cove. Dressed in improvised Arabian costumes, the dancers evoked the fairytale exoticism of the ballet *Scheherazade*; at the same time, they bumped against our awareness of contemporary politics and jiggled towards another reaction.

1. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1pIY5JQLE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1pIY5JQLE), accessed 25 September 2015.

2. Quoted in D. L. Johnson, 'The Griffin Rieco incinerators', *Architectural Association Quarterly*, Autumn 1971, pp. 52–3.

Robyn Backen's 'If you do not speak, do I speak for you?' was exhibited at the Incinerator Art Space, Sydney, as part of the Willoughby Visual Arts Biennial 2015, 'Imagining Place', 5–26 September 2015.

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1920 – 2015  
John Freeland



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Nola Anderson** is an independent arts curator and writer and Chair of the Board of the Canberra Glassworks; **Christina Barton** is Director of the Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Wellington; **Gabriella Coslovich** is a Melbourne arts journalist, former senior arts writer with *The Age* newspaper, and former editor of the National Gallery of Victoria's *Gallery* magazine; **Wystan Curnow** is a Trustee of the Len Lye Foundation; **Max Delany** is Senior Curator, Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; **Julie Ewington** was, until recently, Curatorial Manager, Australian Art at the Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane; now based in Sydney, she is an independent writer, curator and broadcaster; **John Freeland** currently collects and writes on Australian and Japanese ceramics; **Dr Diane Losche** holds a Master of Philosophy and PhD in Anthropology from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts from Barnard College magna cum laude; **Dr Marco Marcon** is co-founder and Director at International Art Space (formerly known as IASKA); **John Murphy** is an independent curator based in Sydney; **Nina Seja** is a writer, curator and academic; she is the author of the photographic history book *PhotoForum at 40: Counterculture, Clusters, and Debate in New Zealand* (Rim Books, 2014); **Daniel Thomas AM**, a former art-museum curator and director (at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Australia and Art Gallery of South Australia) is now retired and living in Tasmania; **Vivienne Webb** is a freelance curator and writer; **Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll** is an editor of *Third Text* based in London and artist researcher at the University of Oxford; she is the author of *Art in the Time of Colony* (2014) with a PhD from Harvard University on Aboriginal art.



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